On the Coming of a Zoroastrian Messiah: A Middle Persian Poem on History and Apocalypticism in Early Medieval Islamic Iran

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Zoroastrian Middle Persian literature includes a rich apocalyptic genre which may have influenced other traditions, specifically Christianity and Islam. Among the many Zoroastrian Middle Persian and Persian texts, the shortest and in many ways most curious is entitled “On the Coming of the Wondrous King Wahrām” (abor madar zāh wahrām zāwāwand). As a token of respect to my teacher, Professor Amin Banani, I would like to translate and discuss the significance of this short Middle Persian poem on the coming of the messianic savior Wahrām / Bahram. The poem not only exhibits religious motifs but also a historical dimension which is important for gauging the attitudes of the Zoroastrian population in seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-century Iran.

Indeed one of the most salient features of Zoroastrian-Islamic interaction is the borrowing of apocalyptic motifs and ideas from the former by the latter. While many scholars have discussed the often-mentioned influence, the mechanism by which Zoroastrian apocalyptic ideas have made the transition to the Islamic tradition has rarely been discussed. I would like to suggest that early Islamic messianic movements such as those instigated by Abu Muslim, Sindbad, and Babak Khorramdin made it possible for Zoroastrian ideas to make the leap into what may be called “populist” Islam. This transfer of ideas was only made possible
through Gnosticism which was able to syncretise such notions among the Iranian and Arab masses, as it had done earlier between the Hellenic and the Iranian world.

Zoroastrianism has no shortage of messianic figures, as the followers of that faith in ancient Iran faced many disasters which shook their lives and shaped their views of history. Alexander the Great’s conquest in the fourth century BCE and the Arab Muslim conquest in the seventh century CE made a deep impression on Zoroastrian Middle Persian writing, much of it contained in its apocalyptic genre. The antiquity of the Zoroastrian apocalypticism is much debated, but as I have tried to show elsewhere, the structure of the Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition betrays its originality and its connection to the Indo-European notions of the end when great calamities take place. J. Alexander has noted that apocalyptic literature can give clues to a community’s reaction to and judgments regarding historical events. The Zoroastrian Middle Persian and Persian apocalyptic texts exactly tell us how the followers of the good religion reacted to foreign conquerors and the calamities to the religious (Achaemenid period) and sectarian (post-Sasanian period) movements.

The calamities which cause the insertion of historical episodes into the apocalyptic texts appear mainly because of Alexander the Great’s conquest of the Achaemenid Empire, the Arab Muslim conquest, and the early Iranian-Islamic sectarian movements. These calamities naturally had repercussions that went beyond the militaristic and physical responses, especially after the invading armies had won and conquered the empire(s). In the case of Alexander’s conquest, S.K. Eddy has noted that the Persian resistance came from the aristocratic and landholding military and religious classes. I tend to think that after the battle, the elite cooperated with the Greek victors in many ways. And resistance, if any, took place in the intellectual and religious sphere. This means it was the Mages and their memory that created the demonization of Alexander the Great as famously expressed in Middle Persian texts as gizistak aleksandar, the “ac- cursed Alexander.” But interestingly, as G. Schoeler has discussed, what was mostly preserved by the Mages was not a memory of the Achaemenid dynasty, but rather the loss of religion. It is only later in the Sasanian period that Alexander is used as one of the important figures of mischief and plays a part in Sasanian historical memory.

As for the Arab Muslim conquest, this event has been seen as a great turning point in the Jewish, Christian and the Zoroastrian traditions. In the case of Zoroastrian apocalyptic thought there are many details which need clarification. One has to separate, as much as possible, the religious from the historical, because they are couched in the mytho-religious tradition of Zoroastrianism and in many instances they converge. An example in this regard can be the figure of Wahrām i Warzāwand (Wahrām the Wondrous) who exhibits divine, apocalyptic, messianic, and histories characteristics. While the divine and apocalyptic character of Wahrām can be deciphered, the historical-messianic aspect appears to be more complex.

In terms of his divine attributes, Wahrām i Warzāwand shares similarities with the Zoroastrian yazata (Avestan) Varəšraya in Yašt XIV whose function is to be the deity of offensive victory. Wahrām in Yašt XIV is invoked to defeat the enemy and aid the Mazda-worshippers/Zoroastrians, but his sheer brute strength and other aspects connect him to pre-Zoroastrian and Indo-Iranian warrior deities. On the other hand, his apocalyptic function is well attested in texts such as the Middle Persian Zand i Wahman Yasn which has been studied in detail by C.G. Cereti. There he has the title of kay and has a martial function (ZWY VII.7):

öy kay ka sīh-sālag bawēd (hād būd *kē āwām gaff)
pod amar drafš spāh ī hindūg ud *čīnīg ṣal-ṣīrīf-drafš
hend (čī drafš ī fīrēnd), abrāstag-drafš ī hend ud
abrāstag-zēn

When that kay will be thirty years old (that is, there was one person the time), an army of Hindūg and Čīnīg with numberless flags, will have upheld banners (because they will hold the banners up), will have raised banners and raised arms.

In another section his messianic characteristics becomes more clear (ZWY VIII.1-4):

ān ī wahrām ī warzāwand rāy paydāg kā pad purr-xwarrarāhi frāz rasēd ud wistawm frāz bandēd pad
gāh ī mwobdān *mowbed ud gāh ī wizurd ī rāst ī
dēn gnumād abēz wīryēd ēn erān dēhān ī man ohr-
mazd dād ud āz ud nīyāz ud kēn ud xešm ud waran ud
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About the Powerful Wahrām it is revealed that he will arrive in fullness of xwarrañ and will appoint Wistaxm to the dignity of mowbedān mowbed and, having entrusted (him) the authentic and true role of the religion, he will rearrange these Ėraman lands which I, Ohrmazd, have created. And greed, need, hate, wrath, lust, envy, and unrighteousness will disappear from the world. The era of the wolf will pass away and the year of the sheep will arrive. And they will seat the Ādur Farrahav, the Ādur Gušasp and Ādur Burzēnmihr back in their own places and duly feed them firewood and incense. And the evil Gannāg Mēnōg, together with the dēwā and those of obscure stock, will be stunned and unconscious.\textsuperscript{12}

It is this messianic activity that has conjoined itself with the historical figures/king of the late antique Iran. K. Czeglédly first suggested that Wahrām I Warzāwānd should be identified with the rebel Wahrām I Čōbīn who defeated the Turks and brought the empire glory and security on its eastern frontier. While he retreated to the East for being unable to withstand the advancing army of king Kusro II/Xusro II, his disappearance led to a scenario in which it was hoped by his followers that one day he would return in a messianic fashion.\textsuperscript{13} But there is another historical figure who may be considered as one that not only is seen in the apocalyptic texts as the savior but who is also mentioned in other Middle Persian texts.

When the last Sasanian king, Yazdgerd III, was retreating to the East, his sons traveled further East asking the Chinese emperor, Gaozong, to aid them in their battle against the Arab Muslims. Pērōz, the elder son of Yazdgerd III established a kingdom called the “Persian Area Command” (Bosi dudhīfī) at Sistān, stationed at Zaranj between 658 and 663 CE. He was recognized as the legitimate king of Iran by the Chinese,\textsuperscript{14} but, as historical sources indicate, by 674-675 CE he left for the Chinese capital, probably because of further Arab Muslim victories.\textsuperscript{15} He died in around 679 CE and his son Narseh was placed on the throne of Iran in exile. Pērōz has been commemorated by a stone statue that is still in existence at the entrance of the mausoleum of Gaozong and which bears the inscription:

Pērōz, King of Persia, Grand General of the Right Courageous Guard and Commander-in-Chief of Persia.\textsuperscript{16}

There the family of Sāsān kept its royal status and its members became military generals and had temples built at Tun-huang (sha-chou), Wu-wei (Liang-chou), Ch’ang-an (founded in 631 CE) and at Loyang. They lived along with other Persians who had been in China for commercial activity or who had fled their ancestral land as a result of the Arab Muslim conquest.\textsuperscript{17} The other son of Yazdgerd III, Wahrām (Aluohan in Chinese sources), attempted to recapture the lost territories from the Arab Muslims. C.G. Cereti in a seminal article on this figure has shown that the poem we are dealing with here is probably related to the activity of this son of Yazdgerd III who died in 710 CE.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, we have the incorporation of three different strands of divine and historical figures into one being presented to us in a poem in the early Islamic period, as Wahrām died in the eight century CE. This piece of evidence also pushes the date of the poem to the post-Sasanian period.

In terms of the structure and style the poem can be considered basically a qasideh of twelve syllables (mostly), which suggests that it was composed probably at the formative period of classical Persian poetry. Thus, at the earliest it could be assigned to the tenth century CE. A Middle Persian poem with this style is unique in the surviving Middle Persian literature. In terms of its vocabulary it also has some unique and interesting words such as mazgit (Arabic: masjid) and gāzīdag (Arabic: jizya). While written in the Pahlavi script, the Middle Persian poem considered here shows such strong classical Persian affinity in vocabulary, rhythm, and structure that it could be thought of as early Classical Persian poetry in the Pahlavi script.

The Pahlavi text of the poem, which does not carry a title, was published by J.D.M. Jamasp-Asana along with other texts belonging to the MK codex.\textsuperscript{19} The poem has been translated into English by H.W. Bailey,\textsuperscript{20} J.C. Tavadia,\textsuperscript{21} F. de Blois,\textsuperscript{22} and into
that there are a thousand elephants, over their heads are elephant-drivers,
that has an adorned flag in the manner of the renowned kings, they will lead the army as army leaders,
a dispatch must be sent, a clever interpreter, when he goes he would tell the Indians,
what we saw at the hand of the Arabs,
with one troop (they) weakened the religion and killed the kings,
(they have killed) our king and among those Iranians, their religion is in the manner of the demons, they eat bread like the dogs
they took sovereignty from the renowned kings, not by skill, not by manliness, but through mockery and scorn,
through oppressiveness, they took from the people, women and sweet property, gardens and orchards, they have placed poll-tax, divided it over the heads, again they have sought the cloth (and) heavy tribute, behold how much evil that demon has cast in this world, there is no more evil than they in the world,
among us will arrive that king Wahrām the Wondrous from the lineage of the Kayanids, then we will bring revenge on the Arabs, in the manner which Rostam brought a hundred revenge of Siyāwash,
we will destroy the mosques, establish fires, we will raze idol-temples and blot them from the world, till evil gets destroyed, the daevic creatures from the world, finished with salutations and happiness.

Notes and Bibliography:

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10 The classical work on this deity is E. Benveniste and L. Renou, Vṛtra and Vṛtrāngā, Paris, 1934.
11 C.C. Cereti, The Zand i Wahanman Yasn, A Zoroastrian Apocalypse, VII.7 (Rome, 1995), 162.
12 ZWY, VIII.1-5.
16 Ibid., p. 191.
19 J.D.M. Jamasp-Asana, Pahlavi Texts (Bombay, 1897-1913), 160-161.

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26 M. Bahar, Pāzūhshī dar asatīr-e Iran, ed. K. Mazdāpουr (Tehran: Tus, 1375), 198-199.
27 B. Gheybi, Amadan-e shah bahrām-e varjavand (Bielefeld: Nemudar, 1372).
28 Bailey reads the word as Arabic bashir; Bahar correctly suggests basil (“send”); see Bahar, “Yek qasideh-ye Pahlavi,” 134-135.
29 There are two interpretations, one emending the word to dasht “hand” (as mentioned in Bailey, Zoroastrian Problems, 195, and Gheybi, Amadan-e shah bahrām, 8); or as it is written dasht “plain” (in Bahar, “Yek qasideh-ye Pahlavi,” 135). Bahar suggests that the reading dasht would only appear in classical Persian and it would be late, considering the poem is in Middle Persian. But it is indeed a late poem and so the construction az dasht “from the hands” is acceptable.
30 Here groh does not stand for “group” or “crowd,” but rather “troop”; see H.S. Nyberg, A Manual of Pahlavi, Part II (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1974), 85.
31 Bailey (Zoroastrian Problems, 195) takes it as aslīg “principal,” while Tavadia (“A Rhymed Ballad in Pahlavi,” 36) suggests aslī “well bred.” I think only Bahar has given the most plausible solution, that is, to take the word as a yellow cloth (asalī- or honey colored) which was sowed on the garment of the Zoroastrians. It is related that during the reign of the Caliph Mutawakkil it was ordered that the dhimmis wear the ‘asalī; see Borhan-e Qate’, ed. M. Mo’in, 5 vols. (Tehran: Ebn Sina, 1342/1963), 3: 1374.
32 Bailey (Zoroastrian Problems, 196) reads the word as “club,” but again Bahar (“Yek qasideh-ye Pahlavi,” 138-139) seems to be right to read it as the number 100.
33 It was S. Kiya who emended the word to Siyāwaxān (1357) which is quoted by Gheybi (Amadan-e shah bahrām, 7, ft. 10). This seems most likely as in the Tarikh-e Sīstān it is said that Rostam went to Turkestan
to revenge the death of Siyāwaxš. See Tarikh-e Sistan, ed. M.-T. Bahar (Tehran: Zovvar, 1314), 7.

While in Middle Persian हिन्दुगन would appear to be an adjectival plural, in classical Persian it can mean the land (हिन्दिवन) as attested in Mojmal al-tavarikh va al-gezas, ed. M.-T. Bahar (Tehran: Khavār, 1318/1939), 105. It should also be noted that Hindustān was also thought to include eastern Afghanistan; see Bahar, ed., Mojmal al-tavarikh, 198, note. 2. In the Bundahišn, XXXIII.32, Wahrām is said to come from Kāwulestān / Kabulistān; see F. Pakzad, Bundahišn: Zoroastrische Kosmogonie und Kosmologie, Band I (Tehran, 2005), 370.

Here again husrawān carries the Classical Persian meaning of "kings" or famous kings.

This is a reference to the cloth worn by the religious minorities as ordered by the Caliph in the Abbasid period.

3.

A Primary Armenian Source on Land Tenure in the Khanate of Iravan (Erevan) from the 16th to the 18th Centuries

George Bournoutian

The emergence of the theocratic Safavid Shi'a state in 1501 challenged the religious and political leadership of the Sunni Ottomans, who saw themselves, and were viewed by many, as the caliphs of the Muslim world. The spread of Safavid ideology into eastern Anatolia and the capture of Baghdad in 1508 by Iranian forces did not meet much resistance, however. The sons of Sultan Bayazid II were feuding over the succession and Twelver Shi'i propaganda had already found many adherents among the Turkmen of eastern Anatolia. However, the Ottomans could not ignore the threat of Iranian attacks into Mesopotamia or Anatolia for long. Therefore, after prevailing over his brothers, the new sultan, Selim I, decided to challenge the leader of the Iranian Shi'ites, Shah Isma'il, who called Imam 'Ali a manifestation of God and himself a descendant of that Imam. The battle of Chaldiran on August 23, 1514 witnessed the total defeat of the Iranian army. Two weeks later, Selim took Tabriz, the capital of Isma'il, but had to withdraw a week later, when his officers refused to continue the campaign in winter.

The next Safavid shah, Tahmasp, had to face the great Ottoman sultan, Suleyman, who began a new campaign against Iran in 1534, occupied Tabriz and recaptured Baghdad. Once again, the Ottoman withdrawal allowed the Safavids to retake much of their lost territory. In 1548, Suleyman, encouraged by the defec-
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